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CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND POLICY BRIEFS  
SUPPLEMENTARY ANALYSIS 3-A

DOING DISCIPLINE DIFFERENTLY: THE GREENFIELD  
MIDDLE SCHOOL STORY

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## **Doing Discipline Differently: The Greenfield Middle School Story**

One key finding of the *Children Left Behind*<sup>1</sup> series has been the critical role of school leadership in setting the tone for how the day-to-day discipline and management of misbehavior is conducted. Interview and survey data from the second and third briefing papers have demonstrated that: (1) principals are sharply divided in their attitudes towards zero tolerance, out-of-school suspension, expulsion, and preventive strategies (2) differences in principal attitude relate both to the characteristics of school principals and to outcomes in terms of discipline and prevention, and (3) many Indiana principals have developed innovative programs which maintain the integrity of the learning environment and preserve the safety of the school without diminishing students' opportunity to learn. In short, these principals believe that there are different and more effective ways of managing discipline in schools than resorting to removal.

One example of how a preventative philosophy can change the disciplinary culture of a school is found in the case of Greenfield Middle School under the leadership of Jim Bever, who became principal during the 1999-2000 school year<sup>2</sup>. Principal Bever is the 2004 MetLife/National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) Indiana Middle School principal of the year honoree. The interviewing staff of the *Children Left Behind Project* were especially intrigued with the story of disciplinary transformation told by Principal Bever. What follows is a summary of that interview, and supporting documentation of the effectiveness of the innovative approaches implemented at Greenfield.

### *A Look at Greenfield Middle School*

Greenfield Middle School is located in Hancock County in east central Indiana, and is classified as suburban by the United States Bureau of the Census<sup>3</sup>. Student enrollment has averaged 470 students annually over the past 8 years, although there has been a steady enrollment growth over the past 4 years<sup>4</sup> while Jim Bever has been the principal. While there is little racial/ethnic diversity at Greenfield<sup>5</sup>, there is some socio-economic diversity<sup>6</sup>.

The staff at Greenfield attributed many of their discipline problems stemming from the Greenfield Central Community Schools (of which Greenfield Middle is a part of) re-districting process of 1997. This process resulted in the perception that many of the academically advanced students were sent to another middle school creating a significant amount of tension at Greenfield:

In the way the boundaries were drawn, a lot of the upper socioeconomic status students went to [the adjacent middle school] which created great concern in this [Greenfield Middle School] building. Many of the teachers felt like 'You're taking our best kids'...it literally began a disastrous down slide that culminated in terrible 1998 and 1999 ISTEP<sup>7</sup> scores. The school was placed on academic probation by the State of Indiana and only getting a two year accreditation, which includes some serious sanctions.

These demographic changes also appear to have adversely impacted the disciplinary climate at Greenfield, resulting in some acts of violence and a heavy reliance on school administrators to deal with student behavior:

We were seeing 300 plus office referrals a month in 1998 and 1999...There were some fairly violent acts occurring in this building...the year prior to me coming to this building, there was even a student who had been so severely beaten she lost continence and was taken out on an ambulance cot. So things were not very good here when I came.

Discipline prior to Bever's arrival seemed to be consistent with the zero tolerance philosophy of punishing even minor student misbehavior severely in an attempt to "send a message" to students<sup>8</sup>:

The atmosphere in the building was one of demanded respect as opposed to earned respect. Comments from students, sometimes inappropriate in nature, were often considered disrespectful and punished as a violation of the schools expectation of respect. There was little delineation between behavior that was inappropriate and in violation of the school's conduct code and behavior that teachers found distasteful or personally objectionable. Both types of behaviors were severely punished when referred to the office. There was a common understanding that students must suffer as a result of punishment.

As described in this teacher's comments to Bever, the high level of suspensions and expulsions seemed to be due, not to any inherent desire to remove students from schools, so much as not knowing what else to do:

'This is the only thing I've ever known. The first principal that I worked under told me you have to put a kid up against the wall now and then to get their attention...It's the only thing I knew in my high school career and it's the only thing I know now.' So I told him, 'Okay, well we're going to learn something different'.

In sum, prior to Bever's arrival, rapid demographic changes and ineffective disciplinary practices at Greenfield Middle School created a school climate characterized by frequent disruptions and at times violent student behavior. Staff there may have used suspension and expulsion not because it solved the problem, but because they simply were not aware of alternative, more effective methods.

#### *Turning It Around: The Elements of Change*

When he became principal during the 1999-2000 school year Bever's approach to discipline focused primarily in two areas: (1) developing relationships with community agencies, and (2) facilitating teacher and student growth and development.

*Key relationships with community agencies.* Bever believed he had to take a swift and direct approach in getting a school with serious and at times violent behavior under control. In his words:

The very first thing I did was taking a very aggressive approach to the discipline piece. I immediately began involving the local police department. We began hiring uniformed security for a lot of our after school functions...So the first thing I did was come in here with a real hard line effort.

In retrospect, however, Principal Bever indicated that this approach was necessary, but not an optimal long-term solution, in establishing safety at Greenfield. The purpose of using local law enforcement, according to Bever was to establish safety, not to manage student behavior. It is thus not surprising that since safety has been established at Greenfield through a greater variety of disciplinary options, a uniformed police presence is no longer necessary. Interestingly, however, the ties between Greenfield and local law enforcement have not ceased, but rather been transformed into a more collaborative relationship:

It's the same thing with the police department...They get to see what we were about and what we stood for which was not taking troubled kids and getting them out the door...We've really opened the door to them. We invite uniformed officers on shift to come in and eat with the kids. I have a detective on the police department who has become very, very involved in our parent leadership group...they've come in and done defensive tactics training...they have talks with our students about self protection and how to stay out of situations that could get them in trouble...We have a wonderful relationship where we help them by not putting kids out on the street who are going to end up becoming a problem for them. We try to find alternatives.

The strategy of using external agencies to make Greenfield a safer and more responsive school has also been extended to agencies beyond law enforcement:

I began to establish some good bridges to community organizations, the police department, the probation department, family social services, and child protective services...we work a great deal with the probation department with

attendance...that's been a great thing. If I had a student in need or I have a student that I suspect may be involved in an abusive situation at home, one quick call to child protective services and we get incredibly fast and cooperative responses to respond collaboratively to support this student and get them through this difficult time.

*Teacher and student growth and development.* One of the most important changes in Greenfield's turnaround was a change in attitudes, feelings, and behaviors of the teaching staff. Bever began by challenging the commonly held belief that Greenfield got the "worst" students due to re-districting:

The first task really involved getting them [teaching faculty] to see that our kids are not the worst students. Are they different maybe than some of the kids they had here before? Yes. Are they less able? Absolutely not.

To reinforce the notion that Greenfield's students were just as capable as the students who had been transferred during redistricting, Bever showed his teaching staff that the students at Greenfield had an ISTEP cognitive skills index that was within one point, plus or minus, than the students they had "lost".

Bever also challenged teachers to become more involved with the administration of discipline, establishing an executive committee, composed of leaders from each of the middle school teams within the building charged with much of the disciplinary decision making:

We started asking our folks to think logically through the discipline piece...the most severe thing we can do is separate a student from school...this is punitive and not always effective in terms of the individual's education. We have to look at another way of doing it...I'm really asking those team leaders [on the executive committee] to truly be leaders of the building...They really assume a lot of the decision making basis in the building. Individuals who are empowered, own that over which they are given power and authority, and when you own it, you take responsibility for it.

Bever's high expectations at Greenfield extended to the teachers as well. A strong emphasis was placed on responsible behavior and decision making among the teaching faculty:

Walk your talk. When teachers don't model the behaviors they expect out of their students, the stage is set for disaster. And when you have teachers who rule through intimidation, you're going to have a mess in your school because the kids will respond similarly....Kids must come first. Every decision we make at Greenfield Middle school always proceeds with the question 'what is going to be best for the kids?'

Finally, special attention was paid to identification of barriers preventing students from taking ownership of their behavior:

We bring kids into classrooms as kindergartners and we start this long list of rules and then we start saying, 'Did you follow the rules?' Then they [the students] start identifying themselves as a 'good boy' or 'bad boy' –that type of thing. And we never empower them with the decision-making skills to decide whether what they are doing is right or wrong, appropriate or inappropriate.

### *How Effective Were These Changes?*

The change in culture and climate at Greenfield has been dramatic according to Principal Bever:

We just don't see the issues of physical violence anymore. Do we have aggressive middle school boys in pushing and shoving matches now and then? Yes. Do we have the highly aggressive fist throwing and all out fights? No. Very, very rarely does that happen anymore. The office referrals we now see are more typical with what you're going to see when dealing with middle schools.

Data drawn from the state of Indiana database on out-of-school suspension and expulsion over the last five years<sup>9</sup> provide additional evidence of the disciplinary changes at Greenfield. Table 1 is a comparison of the disciplinary infractions for the year prior to Bever's arrival and during the first year of his principalship. The out-of-school

suspension incident rate dropped from 50.67 incidents per 100 students in 1998-1999, to 18.53 incidents per 100 students in 1999-2000. Moreover, the number of suspensions and expulsions for drugs, weapons, and alcohol incidents dropped from 14 to 1, even in the face of an increase in student enrollment.

These changes in the data appear to be maintained over time. Comparing the four years prior to Bever assuming a leadership role to the four years of his tenure as principal, the out-of-school suspension and expulsion incident rates have dropped significantly (see Figure 1), and since 2000, are roughly equivalent to state averages for middle schools<sup>10</sup>. Further, the average numbers of suspensions and expulsions for drugs, weapons and alcohol have dropped almost eightfold (see Figure 2). Very clearly then, the different disciplinary approaches and philosophies taking hold at Greenfield Middle School have changed the consequences experienced by its students.

Most importantly, these changes in disciplinary climate and outcome appear to extend to the learning environment. Bever notes that test scores have increased, although he still hopes for more improvement:

That piece [the learning environment] is much slower to respond. We are seeing a difference, however. Our teachers are learning how to retool their teaching to focus not on their teaching, but rather the students learning. We've seen some appreciable increases in student achievement as measured by ISTEP over the past several years, but I don't think that we're performing at a level that is consistent with our student's ability.

Bever attributes some of the gains in student learning to changes in the teacher-student relationship:

What we do see though is just much more positive interactions between students and teachers and I think that alone has certainly helped us out in terms of the learning environment.



Bever may be underestimating the effects of school climate change and improvements in student achievement at Greenfield Middle School. Figure 3 shows that since the 2000-2001 school year, one year after Bever became principal, Greenfield Middle School's percentage of students passing both the English/Language Arts and Math sections of ISTEP has been higher than the state median for Indiana middle schools, averaging around the 60<sup>th</sup> percentile.

*There is Still Much More That Can be Done...*

Principal Bever is quick to point out that he believes there is still much work yet to be done at Greenfield, stating, "We're moving in the right direction but again I'll emphasize we're measuring in millimeters movement that needs to be measured in miles". He is especially cognizant of the demands placed on staff by a more preventative and individualized approach to school discipline:

Every move we make creates a ripple, in effect, placing increasing demands on our faculty. Innovation and improvement puts a great deal of pressure on our staff to learn new things and conduct business differently, all the while continuing to work with up to 170 students per day. We've do a lot of good on very, very few resources. It's taxing and our folks are really spread far too thin.

He feels strongly that policymakers must be aware of the resources that schools need in order to develop more effective disciplinary climates. In particular, he argues for state resources to support the presence of more adult role models:

Only 15% of a youngster's time, from kindergarten through the senior year of high school, is spent under the direct influence of the school and its personnel. Even though that is relatively little time, we can have a significant positive impact on our students if we play our game reasonably well. I need additional high quality, well prepared adults who can work with kids in small ratios. In this

manner, we can maximize the impact of good adult role models on our students' lives.

Bever believes that these additional adults can assist schools in the goals of implementing character development programs:

So many [educators] have lost sight of the character development piece...some would argue that character development has already been mandated, but mandating that folks go through the motions of character development as opposed to truly owning it and prescribing that every kid has at least one significant adult in that building, well that's another story. We need money to bring people in to work with students and try and reverse this trend. If we don't, I really fear for our future.

### **Summary**

The Greenfield Middle School story demonstrates that it is possible to have a responsive and safe school that is conducive to student learning, while at the same time significantly reducing the number of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. Prior to the 1999-2000 school year, Greenfield was a school characterized by frequent disruptive and at times violent student behavior, a less-than-effective approach to behavior management, and low academic and behavior expectations for its students. Students were punished frequently and severely for a wide range of student behavior, including relatively minor infractions, probably because there was little knowledge of alternatives. Punitive approaches were “the only thing I have ever known”, according to one teacher.

Greenfield has learned that a different way of interacting with students produces different results. The transformation of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors at Greenfield suggest that even in schools with high rates of suspension and expulsion, changes are possible that can keep schools safe and productive while maximizing student opportunity

to learn. A consistent and intentional focus on both the development of relationships with external agencies, and teacher and student growth, is working at Greenfield.

The shifts in disciplinary philosophy and practice put in place by Principal Bever resulted in substantial changes in the disciplinary outcomes experienced by students. The fact that Greenfield's out-of-school suspension rate, expulsion rate, and suspensions and expulsions for drugs, weapons, and alcohol all dropped significantly the first year of new leadership and maintained those lower rates over time is highly noteworthy. It suggests that administrator's and teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors make a sizeable contribution to how students are disciplined.

Most importantly, these changes in the disciplinary climate also make the learning environment more effective. Greenfield's ISTEP scores have consistently been above the state median one year after Bever became principal. These findings are consistent with the statewide outcomes presented in Policy Brief #2 (*"Unplanned Outcomes"*, Skiba, Rausch, & Ritter, 2004) showing that, regardless of demographics, schools with lower rates of out-of-school suspension tend to have higher passing rates on ISTEP. In an era of educational accountability, the fact that reducing suspensions and expulsions correspond with ISTEP increases suggests that it is possible to have high student achievement without removing a substantial number of students from the schooling context.

The implementation of this new philosophy at Greenfield has not been resource-free. In an era when schools and teachers are being required to do more and more with fewer resources, placing the responsibility of change solely on the backs of classroom teachers is difficult and can be overwhelming. A substantial commitment of time, effort, and scarce school resources have been necessary to create the changes seen at Greenfield.

These changes are by no means complete and will require additional resources in order to grow and evolve.

Greenfield Middle School is demonstrating that schools can be positive, responsive, and safe places that foster the academic, social and emotional growth of *all* students. The success of Greenfield and Principal Bever shows that the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of the adults in the school, especially those in leadership positions, make a substantial difference in the outcomes experienced by students. The Greenfield Middle School story, and the perspectives infused by Principal Jim Bever, show that discipline can truly be done differently.

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#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> The executive summary, full-text briefs, and other supplemental information about the Children Left Behind Series can be accessed via the internet at <http://ceep.indiana.edu/ChildrenLeftBehind>

<sup>2</sup> Jim Bever was the assistant principal, primarily in charge of discipline during much of this school year and became the acting principal during the Spring of 2000

<sup>3</sup> The U.S. Bureau of the Census assigns one of 8 locale classifications to schools based upon location and community population. These locales were collapsed to create four school locale designations: urban, suburban, town, and rural

<sup>4</sup> The school's annual enrollment average from 1995 to 1999 was 455 students. From 1999 to 2003, Greenfield averaged 484 students

<sup>5</sup> For the 2002-2003 school year, Greenfield's student body was 98% White, 1% Hispanic, and 1% Native American

<sup>6</sup> A majority of Greenfield's student body can be classified as "blue collar", and approximately 20-25% of Greenfield's students are eligible for free or reduced lunch services

<sup>7</sup> The Indiana State Test of Educational Progress (ISTEP) is Indiana's statewide accountability assessment

<sup>8</sup> A more comprehensive description about the philosophy of Zero Tolerance can be found in the first briefing paper of the Children Left Behind series, *Zero Tolerance: The Assumptions and the Facts* (Skiba, 2004) available on the project website <http://ceep.indiana.edu/ChildrenLeftBehind>

<sup>9</sup> The data were drawn from the Suspension and Expulsion Report form from the Indiana Department of Education, available online at <http://dew4.doe.state.in.us/htbin/sas1.sh>

<sup>10</sup> The 4-year (1999-2000 to 2002-2003 school year) average expulsion and out-of-school suspension incident rates per 100 students for Indiana middle schools were 0.89 and 23.29 respectively. These rates were calculated by dividing the total number of out-of-school suspension or expulsion incidents for middle schools divided by the total number of middle school students, multiplied by 100

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*Table 1*

*Disciplinary Infractions at Greenfield Middle School: 1998-1999 and 1999-2000 School Years <sup>a</sup>*

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School Year	School Enrollment	OSS <sup>b</sup>	OSS Rate <sup>c</sup>	DWA <sup>d</sup>	DWA Rate <sup>e</sup>
1998-1999	450	228	50.67	14	3.11
1999-2000	475	88	18.53	1	0.21

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*Note: Jim Bever became principal during the 1999-2000 school year*

<sup>a</sup> Data were drawn from the Suspension and Expulsion Report form from the Indiana Department of Education

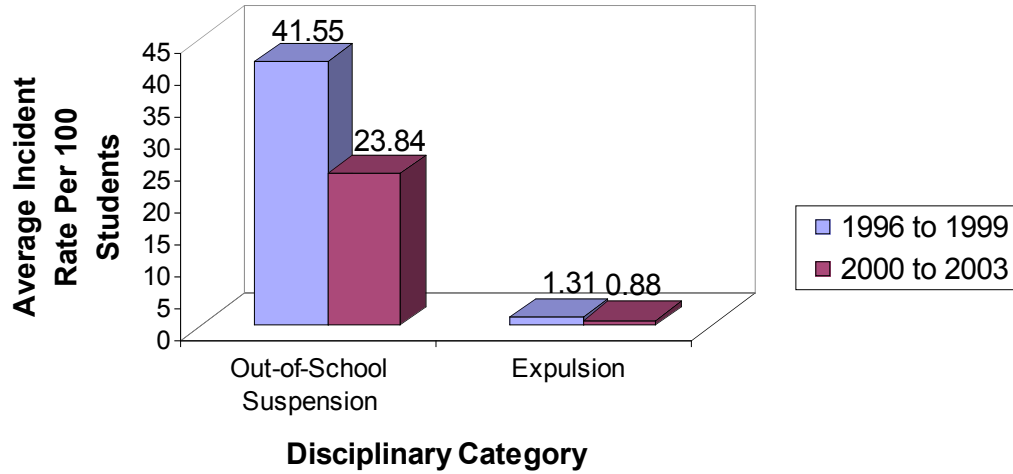
<sup>b</sup> OSS is the total incidents of out-of-school suspension

<sup>c</sup> OSS Rate is calculated by dividing the total number of out-of-school suspensions by the total school enrollment, multiplied by 100. Thus, this rate represents the total out-of-school suspension incidents per 100 students, and can be compared across school years

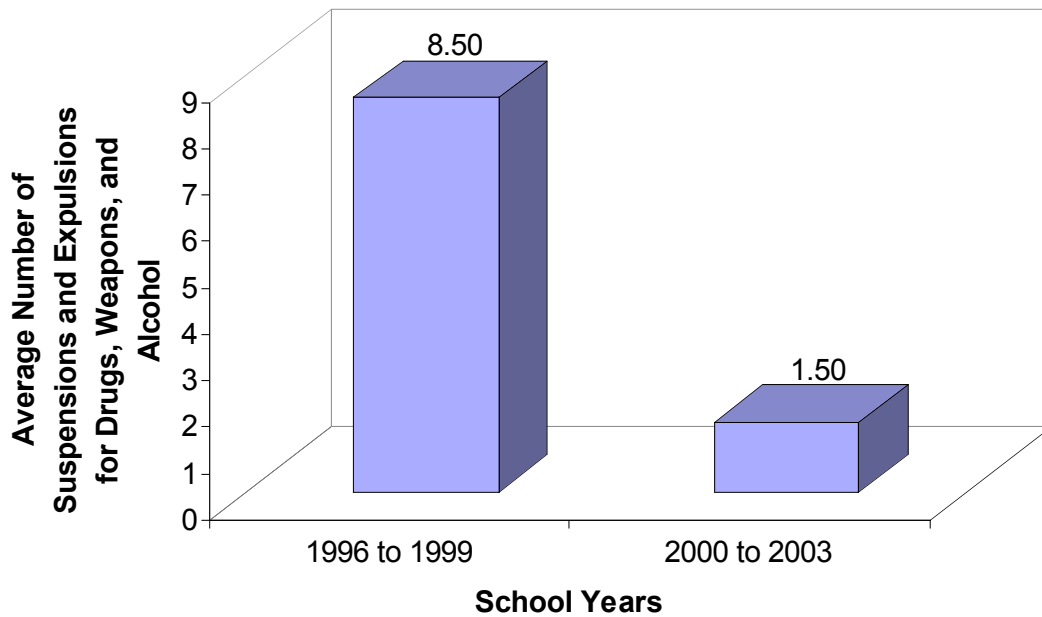
<sup>d</sup> DWA is the total number of suspensions and expulsions for drugs, weapons, and alcohol

<sup>e</sup> DWA Rate is calculated by dividing the total number of suspensions and expulsions for drugs, weapons, and alcohol by the total school enrollment, multiplied by 100. This rate represents the total drug, weapon, and alcohol incidents per 100 students, and can be compared across school years

**Figure 1. Out-of-School Suspension and Expulsion Rates at Greenfield Middle School: 4-Year Average Comparisons**



**Figure 2. Suspensions and Expulsions for Drugs, Weapons, and Alcohol**



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**Figure 3. Greenfield Middle School Percent Passing ISTEP  
Compared to State Median for Indiana Middle Schools:  
4-Year Comparison**

